

Cognoscenti

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1123 hours, November 11, 2513 (Military Calendar) / UNSC Research Station Hopeful

A faint whirl sounded in the distance as Doctor Halsey stretched to reach the top drawer of her filing cabinet. She pulled it out of the metal framework with a screech and a mild explosion of dust, coughing as she staggered to place it on her desk. Cleaning: it was not the most glamorous of jobs, to be sure, but she enjoyed the reflection it allowed — not to mention that she didn't trust the Hopeful's janitors with her work for one second.

"Knock, knock."

Doctor Halsey took a deep breath and smiled faintly without turning around. "Feel free to enter, Admiral, this is your domain."

Rear Admiral Ysionris Jeromi stepped lightly into the room, lab coat brushing his knees. "I love that word, 'Admiral'. Average age is forty-eight, too. I've got six years on these bastards." He smiled somewhat forcibly.

"I dare say those bastards would accuse you if impropriety if they heard you say as much."

"That," he said, "is why I'm glad you can keep a secret." He placed a hand on the small of her back and bent to read the label of the drawer she was working on. On it, the words '2506-2507' were scrawled in a tight black ink. At this, he grunted and visibly

withdrew. "Packrat from hell."

A sickening dose of adrenaline flooded her veins before she could check it. She chastised herself; it wasn't as if this conversation hadn't been weeks in coming. An ONI representative had approached her at a conference in September, requesting an application for a post as head of a new project - and she had jumped with heart and soul at the opportunity. The basic premise of the SPARTAN project was everything she had ever dreamed of: something she was ready and willing to name as her life's work. It meant, however, relinquishing her post at the Hopeful research station, and abandoning the guidance Jeromi had offered her for the past seven years as his student.

She brushed the dust from her hands and sat down to her desk, folding her hands and staring at the Admiral with admission. "I imagine," she said, "that you didn't come here to help me pack?"

"Brilliant deduction, Catherine, as always." Jeromi cleared his throat of the raw sarcasm he seldom used. "Dare I ask how the final interview went, then?"

"Sublimely, thank you."

"I bet you were running on nerves the entire time."

"No," she lied, slick as slick. "I was fine. It was actually over fairly quickly â€“ they began with a quick quiz, to make sure I could demonstrate sufficient scientific knowledge and communication skills in person, then a one-on-one interview â€“ "

"Which I imagine went something like 'My name is Catherine Elizabeth Halsey and I am prepared to willingly allow every aspect of my personal life to be ripped tendon from tendon and placed on a pedestal in the name of all that is sinful' "

"And a quick physical before presentation of the proposal," she finished decisively. "And I'm rather fond of being placed on a pedestal."

"But your guts, Catherine. Your living guts!"

She blinked, without looking up; that would require acknowledging the agitation behind his jest, something she was not keen on doing. "I do not want to know who in their right mind awarded you a badge."

He placed his hands behind his back and examined her thoughtfully for a moment, before quietly asking, "My dear Lady Disdain, dost thou yet live?"

Doctor Halsey looked up in surprise. She tapped a pen against the frosted glass that covered her desk and clicked it twice, with a deliberate slowness, just stopping herself from chewing on the end. "I amâ€¦not entirely sure of the kind of answer you're looking for."

"An honest one would be nice, for starters, though I suspect that may be asking too much of you. Secrecy is in our nature. ONI employees most of all."

"Well, you've without a doubt earned one." She leaned back in her

chair, tapping her bottom lip with the pen in search for an answer that would satisfy him " and finding none.

"And?"

"And, I would, without guilt and without question, devote my life to the betterment of humanity despite the consequences. If you do not consider that 'living' then so be it, but do not expect me to make allowances."

"What a textbook answer. You're going to allow your work to eat away your humanity, Catherine, I've seen it happen and it's bad for you. Bad for your judgment. In this case, bad for my station and our research and myself."

"How very selfish of you," she snapped, and then bit her tongue. It was times such as these where she faced the unfortunate fact that, despite whatever intellectual ability she possessed, at twenty-one she was still very much a child.

He ignored the comment and went on. "ONI is " you don't understand them. Or you understand them blindly, without full comprehension of the consequences. My grandfather was a physicist; he headed an experiment trying to determine the limits of slipspace travel. They'd do the most barbaric things " serial prisoners were placed in little more than aluminum boxes to see if they'd survive the trip."

She glared at him. "You can't say that hasn't saved lives. Without a legal standard to build our ships upon " not to mention knowledge of the consequences - there's no way something wouldn't have happened eventually-"

"Damnit, Halsey, that's not the point." He clenched his fists on the edge of the table. "You are above this."

"My answer is still no."

Admiral Jeromi straightened and visibly regained composure. "I imagine this will be the last time I see you as a mentor?"

Catherine felt her nails involuntarily scrape the frosted glass. "If you so choose. The final files have been transferred to my office at the labyrinth; Deja took care of it this morning."

"In that case, morituri te salutamus, my friend " and I bid thee adieu." He bowed his head once, and then exited without so much as a handshake.

Doctor Halsey leaned back in her chair and sighed. Morituri te salutamus. We who are about to be dead salute you. 'We' meaning whom? Who Jeromi considered to be ethical scientists? Fine, she thought. Leave it as is. Antagonize me. You cannot guilt me into compliance. I will not allow it; not allow something that goes against all morals, all principles, against the very fiber of my being. Hate me and my ambitions if you like but do not attempt to stop something necessary to the survival of mankind as a whole because the methods offend your "moral principles".

Do no harm; that was the mantra. Yes, in the SPARTAN project, there

would be much sacrifice: there was no doubt of that. However, the fate of seventy-children paled in comparison to that of the thousands they might save in the coming war. Or the millions. Billions.

In that sense, at least, she was fully justified.

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Credit where credit is due: Shakespeare ("Much Ado About Nothing"), Dickinson ("Sic Transit Gloria Mundi" READ IT), the Romans (various Latin aphorisms), and Bungie (in all their glory). Yes, I'm a halo-playing chick who adores classics. Suck it up.

End
file.